



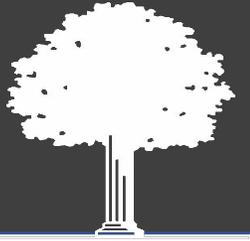
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Building the Plane While
Flying It: Creating a
Collaborative Funder +
News Ecosystem in
Northeast Ohio

Lila Mills, Communications Manager,
Neighborhood Connections

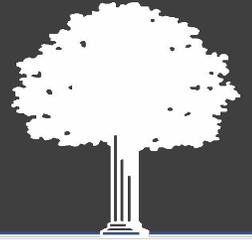


History of thinking about this

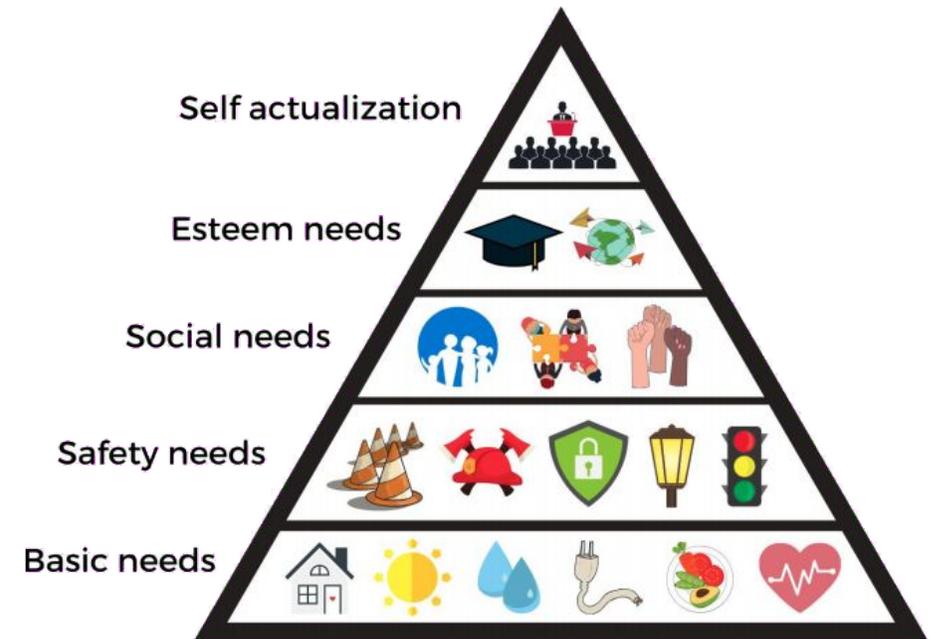


- We had an opportunity to work with the **Knight Foundation** on a human centered design project about the adult literacy epidemic in Cleveland. This prompted us to bridge to additional research to try to understand what information is available in our community.
 - How do residents receive information?
 - What kind of information are they seeking?
 - What does the information ecosystem look like in our community?
 - For information providers (journalists on the frontlines), what is their lived experience today?

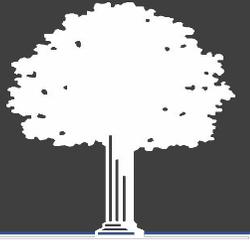
What did residents tell us?



- They felt a deep level of distrust in media
- Legacy media are relying on antiquated narratives in their storytelling
- Information about basic needs was not seen as newsworthy...until COVID-19 came along
- Residents frequently don't know where decisions about their neighborhoods and their city are being made
- What emerged was the reliance on interpersonal networks to get news: “Shirley and Jackie are Google for my neighborhood”
- Small grassroots media are starting to fill in the information gaps – to provide stories to neighborhoods from neighbors

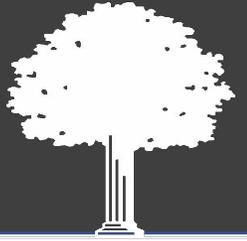


We also talked to journalists



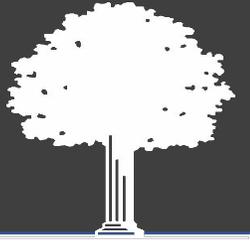
- Recognize that resources are limited and the pace doesn't allow for the deep grassroots connections and storytelling of the past. Often feel disconnected from the community they are reporting on.
- There is also the need for media literacy, media training in the community to help readers decipher and interpret news
- Journalists expressed a strong desire for regional coverage and to tell a larger story that affects both Cleveland and Akron.
- In Cleveland specifically, there is frustration with closed government – the inability to work with city and county officials, records requests, coverage of committee meetings, etc.

So what is our experiment?



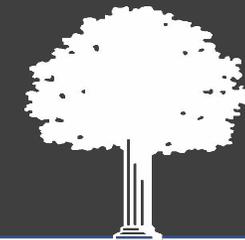
- Thanks to Stefanie and her team, we convened a **collaborative media workshop** in August 2019 with traditional journalists and resident media makers.
- Then we brought the group back together in October and issued a challenge. **Five funders pulled together nearly \$120,000** (an experiment in itself) to provide microgrants of up to 12K for 6-month projects that address basic information needs in the community.
- Our co-funders:
 - Akron Community Foundation
 - The Center for Community Solutions
 - The George Gund Foundation
 - Knight Foundation

What is our experiment?



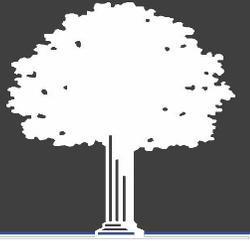
- The priorities for this initial round of grantmaking:
 - Create topic-based collaborative journalism projects that respond to community information needs and that explore and elevate solutions.
 - Encourage media outlets to explore the strengths and resources already present in the region, and to build trust among these communities.
 - Conduct restorative journalism that reframes community narratives to spotlight resident resilience and neighborhood progress, lifting up perspectives that are often not reflected in the traditional news media.
- The nine collaborative efforts span 22 media organizations and individual journalists and nearly 30 community organizations

So what else are we doing?

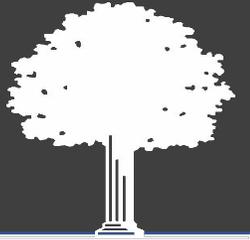


- To address the frustration with closed government, we partnered with **City Bureau** to bring **Documenters** to Northeast Ohio.
- To continue to address the idea of regional collaboration, we collaborated with the **Solutions Journalism Network** to explore the possibilities for a Cleveland-Akron newsroom collaborative, inspired by Resolve Philly, the Detroit Journalism Collaborative, Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, and other great models from around the country.
- And to make sure there is equity in capacity support across the newsrooms, we are funding a **Report for America** position to serve in a “stringer” capacity - working across the newsrooms to report deeply on the determined editorial topic.
- Coming up: Exploration of nonprofit newsrooms, fellowship models

What have we learned on this journey?



- First and foremost, don't go it alone as a funder.
- Similarly, to foster internal buy-in, build a cross-departmental team to explore it together.
- Be willing to experiment with small funding ideas. Don't rush to make the big bet – use experiments and pilots and small investments to start to build confidence in the work.
- Don't feel the need to re-invent the wheel. Every experiment we shared today has been “borrowed” from other communities in this country.
- Create a sense of urgency for the work. This isn't a looming crisis, it's already here.
- Position your support as preserving democracy and empowering residents, not trying to save newsrooms.



Cleveland's double crisis – coronavirus and a shrinking number of reporters to cover it

By **Margaret Sullivan**

March 15, 2020 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

News organizations everywhere are under immense pressure as a pandemic sweeps the globe.

Reporters scurry to cover an eruption of breaking news: deaths, illness, fear, cancellations, and Oval Office pronouncements that may or may not be true. Editors, meanwhile, are trying not only to get the news out but to keep their staffs safe — sometimes by instructing them to work remotely.

But if there were a competition for the American newsroom enduring the most hellish month, the Plain Dealer in Cleveland certainly would be among the finalists.

There's never been more of a need to cover basic needs.



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QUESTIONS?

